

The shutdown of GM's Lordstown plant

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March 5 was the last day of production at the General Motors Lordstown Assembly Plant, a giant 6.2 million square foot industrial complex located halfway between Cleveland, Ohio and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. On Tuesday, after more than a half-century of operation and the production of more than 16 million vehicles, the last 1,400 workers walked out of the factory, which once employed 13,000 workers on three shifts.

GM, which made \$11.8 billion in 2018 profits, is shutting five plants in the US and Canada this year, including in Detroit, Baltimore and Oshawa, and eliminating 14,000 jobs as part of a global restructuring to boost returns to its wealthiest shareholders. The companies, driven by the demands of Wall Street, are carrying out a ruthless attack on workers.

The closure and the ripple effects on suppliers and local businesses will produce a social catastrophe in a region already devastated by decades of deindustrialization and facing collapsing school systems and an escalating opioid crisis.

The closing of the Lordstown plant is a historical verdict on the United Auto Workers (UAW) and all the unions and their policies of nationalism and the defense of capitalism. It is the product of decades of betrayal by the UAW and its transformation into a junior partner of the auto companies in the exploitation of workers and the suppression of the class struggle.

The closure has met with no resistance from the UAW, which has spent the last four months since the GM announcement holding prayer vigils, filing worthless lawsuits and joining Trump and Ohio Democrats in blaming Mexican and Chinese workers for the shutdowns. As it has done for the last four decades, the UAW has signaled its willingness to impose any concessions demanded by GM in upcoming contract negotiations to convince the automaker to “save” the plant.

The Lordstown factory, built in 1966 just outside of the steel-making town of Youngstown, Ohio, occupies an esteemed place in the history of the American working class. In the early 1970s, it was the site of a series of militant labor struggles that were part of the 3,619 major work stoppages, involving 16.6 million US workers, that swept across every industry between 1968 and 1977. The strike wave in the US was a component of an international upsurge of resistance to efforts to force workers to pay for the world capitalist crisis, including the mass strikes by British coal miners that brought down the Tory government in 1974.

In an effort to combat its Japanese competitors, GM sought to use new technology, including robotic welding machines, to drastically increase output at Lordstown for its new Chevrolet Vega car. After laying off 300 workers in the early 1970s, GM increased the line speed from 60 to 101 cars per hour—the fastest rate of any factory in the world—giving workers only 36 seconds to complete their tasks instead of the standard 60.

The workforce, whose average age was 24 and included many ex-soldiers who had been radicalized by the horrors of the Vietnam War, revolted. In March 1972, the UAW was forced to call a strike. After isolating the 22-day strike, the UAW signed a deal that did not address the central issue of speed-up.

Opposition, including wildcat strikes, open defiance of managers and the deliberate sabotage of vehicles, continued. So rebellious were the workers that *BusinessWeek* magazine coined the term “Lordstown syndrome” to define the militancy of an entire generation of industrial workers determined to fight exploitation.

The Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, was intensely involved in the Lordstown struggle and many other struggles of autoworkers in this period. In a 1973 pamphlet, *From Sit-Down to Lordstown*, the Workers League pointed to the “virtual state of civil war” between autoworkers and GM and noted that “the most volatile and militant section of the UAW represented by the youngest workers” had “forced the reluctant UAW leadership to call a strike.”

In November 1973, the party’s newspaper, the *Bulletin*, mounted a defense of the “Lordstown Four,” who were framed up by GM and local authorities and jailed on bogus charges.

During this period, although workers consistently clashed with the union leadership and their corruption and collaboration with the auto bosses, workers still looked at unions as their organizations. Despite the bureaucratized character of the unions, workers could still make gains during this period of relative economic boom and US industrial dominance.

The basic political mechanism through which the UAW and AFL-CIO subordinated the working class to capitalism and American imperialism was the unions’ alliance with the Democratic Party and their opposition to a politically independent movement of the working class. That is why the Workers League, in its fight to build a new revolutionary leadership in the unions, placed at the center of the fight against

the labor bureaucracy the demand that the unions break with the Democratic Party and establish a Labor Party based on socialist policies. This tactic lost its viability as the unions evolved into direct arms of the corporations and the state in suppressing the class struggle.

By the end of 1970s, the American ruling class responded to the increasing loss of its global economic dominance by ending its policy of relative class compromise and unleashing an all-out war to claw back all the gains workers had achieved through decades of struggle. Exploiting advances in telecommunications and transportation, US-based corporations shifted production to low-wage countries, while plant closings and mass layoffs were used to extract huge wage and benefits concessions from workers in the US. The 1979-80 Chrysler bailout was followed by Reagan's smashing of the PATCO air traffic controllers' strike in 1981 and a decade of violent strike-breaking and union-busting.

The globalization of capitalist production and the growth of transnational production completely undermined the unions, which were based on the protection of the national labor market. However, the catastrophe that befell American workers, like their counterparts around the world, was not the inevitable outcome of economic processes.

At every turn, the efforts of autoworkers and other sections of workers to resist the attack on jobs and living standards were sabotaged by the UAW and other unions, which isolated and defeated strikes and colluded with the employers in the closing of plants, the imposition of mass layoffs and the framing-up and victimization of militant workers.

In the early 1980s, the UAW officially adopted the corporatist policy of "labor-management partnership" as its guiding principle. Rejecting the class struggle as outmoded, the UAW set out to crush any resistance to the US-based automakers in the name of making them more competitive against their Asian and European rivals. This went hand-in-hand with the promotion of racism and national chauvinism, which led to the 1982 murder of Chinese American Vincent Chin by a Chrysler foreman and his laid-off stepson.

UAW Local 1112 at Lordstown became the model for labor-management collusion. As a January 2010 *New York Times* article, titled "A once-defiant UAW now focuses on GM's success," approvingly noted, "United Automobile Workers' leaders in Lordstown, Detroit and other cities where clashes with management were once common said they have since decided that their only chance to survive in a global economy is to work with, not against, their employers."

"Everyone has come to the realization that management is not the enemy, and the union is not the enemy," Jim Graham, president of Local 1112, told the *Times*, adding, "The enemy is foreign competition."

The endless concessions imposed on workers never saved a single job. Since 1979, the number of UAW members employed by GM, Ford and Chrysler has fallen from 750,000

to 150,000. In exchange for its betrayal of the workers, however, the UAW has received billions of dollars from the auto bosses, funneled through joint training centers, and the UAW-controlled retiree health care trust owns 100 million GM shares, valued at around \$4 billion.

Fiat Chrysler executives paid millions in illegal bribes to UAW negotiators who agreed to contracts over the past decade that halved the wages of new hires, abolished the eight-hour work day and drastically expanded the number of temporary part-time workers who pay UAW dues but have no rights.

The closing of the Lordstown plant is the tragic outcome of nearly a half-century of endless betrayals. The unions long ago ceased to be working class organizations and have been transformed into avid participants in the exploitation and impoverishment of the working class.

As autoworkers prepare for the battles ahead, including to resist the plant closings and the contract fight this summer, they must review this history and draw the appropriate conclusions. They must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the corrupt right-wing unions. New organizations of struggle, rank-and-file factory committees, must be built, independent of the UAW and based on an entirely different perspective and strategy.

The only answer to the global assault on jobs and living standards by the transnational auto giants and their Wall Street investors is the forging of the unity of autoworkers all over the world and the rejection of the race to the bottom promoted by the corporations and the unions. The upheaval by the *maquiladora* workers in Matamoros, Mexico, who rebelled against slave-labor wages and sweatshop conditions enforced by the unions, shows that workers in Mexico, China and other countries are not the enemies of US workers, but their allies and brothers in struggle.

The broadest industrial mobilization of autoworkers, including the organization of strikes, plant occupations and mass protests, and the fight to unite with all workers across the US and internationally, must be fused with a new socialist political strategy. The working class must reject the "right" of the capitalist exploiters to shut plants and destroy the lives and communities of workers. Instead, giant corporations like GM must be transformed into public enterprises collectively owned and democratically controlled, as part of the reorganization of the world economy to meet human needs, not corporate profit.



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